

***Buddhism and Modernity: Sources from Nineteenth-Century Japan.* Edited by Orion Klautau and Hans Martin Krämer. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021. 300 pages. \$28 (paperback), \$80 (hardcover). ISBN 0824888251 (paperback), ISBN 978-0824888251 (hardcover).**

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In reading this book I couldn't help but be reminded of an experience I had not long after I first arrived in Japan in 1961. One morning, the elderly woman who first taught me Japanese at a Tokyo language school shared a story about her grandfather that had taken place shortly at the beginning of the Meiji era in 1868, when he was yet a samurai. This was at a time before the advent of trains, so it took her grandfather nearly a day to walk from Tokyo to Yokohama. He had read that Christian missionaries were living there following their arrival from the US.

Upon reaching Yokohama, her grandfather sought out the lodgings of one of the missionaries and knocked on his door. Upon being asked his business, her grandfather told the missionary: "I want to become a Christian." Both surprised and somewhat startled, the missionary asked, "What do you know about Christianity?" Her grandfather answered, "Nothing, but if Japan is to become a modern, industrialized nation, we must have a religious faith like yours since it produced such a powerful nation."

I recall that when I first heard this story, I couldn't help wondering why my teacher's grandfather had believed that the development of a modern industrialized nation depended on its embrace of Christianity or, for that matter, any particular religion. Even prior to my arrival in Japan, I'd read that most Japanese were traditionally Buddhists. Why

did they think it would be necessary to embrace Christianity if they wanted to modernize their nation?

Looking back at this experience now, I can only regret that a book like *Buddhism and Modernity* was not yet available, for it goes a long way toward explaining how challenged Japanese Buddhist leaders were by the onslaught of the West and all it represented. At the same time, it introduces readers to just how rapidly Japanese Buddhist leaders, regardless of sectarian affiliation, reinvented Buddhism as a religion fully prepared to confront, if not overcome, the challenges they faced. How they did so is the central topic of this book, using original translations of key texts—many available for the first time in English—by central figures in Japan’s transition to the modern era as the medium for understanding their thinking.

The book consists of five major sections, each of which consists of either four or five chapters, making a total of twenty-two chapters in all. The translations are taken from the writings of such major figures as Inoue Enryō, Sasaki Gesshō, Hara Tanzan, Shimaji Mokurai, Kiyozawa Manshi, Murakami Senshō, Tanaka Chigaku, and Shaku Sōen, representatives of a wide range of Japan’s traditional Buddhist sects. While these writers are well recognized by Buddhist studies scholars and Japanese historians, they have drawn much less attention outside of these circles. Additionally, the present book fills the chronological gap between the premodern era and the twentieth century by focusing on the crucial transition period of the latter part of the nineteenth century, including a few contributions from the early twentieth century.

In light of my own research interests, one of the early twentieth century contributions that caught my eye was a speech delivered by Rinzai Zen Master Shaku Sōen at the invitation of the Japanese-owned Southern Manchurian Railway on the occasion of his second visit to Manchuria in 1912. Michael Mohr translated this speech in part 5, “Japan and Asia,” chap. 3 of the book entitled, “The Japanese People’s Spirit.” In his informative introduction, Mohr notes the speech “provides a sample of the questionable rhetoric used by a Zen priest within the context of Japanese expansion into East Asia and its colonization of new territories” (p. 253).

In writing this, Mohr was no doubt referring to such comments by Sōen as those given at the conclusion of his speech (p. 261):

Japan is really a small country but, from the perspective of its spirit, it extends over the whole world. This is why I think that in the future

it will be truly difficult to make Japan's brilliance shine in the world by relying only on material power, or by trusting exclusively our knowledge or erudition. Thus, to put the kind of academic knowledge that you have acquired to good use, if you possess the Yamato Soul, namely the spirit of Bushidō, then the Japanese Empire will prosper forever.

While the above quotation may be said to employ some "questionable rhetoric" it still falls within the realm of celebrating the nationalistic fervor of the times as found in similar pronouncements made by religious leaders of the mostly Western imperial powers of that age. Yet, as far as Sōen is concerned, it is noteworthy that he was capable of going far beyond this questionable rhetoric to turn Buddhism as a whole into a jingoistic faith promoting death on the battlefield. In 1906, reflecting on his time as a chaplain in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War, Sōen wrote:

I wished to have my faith tested by going through the greatest horrors of life, but I also wished to inspire if I could our valiant soldiers with the ennobling thoughts of the Buddha, so as to enable them to die on the battlefield with the confidence that the task in which they are engaged is great and noble. I wished to convince them of the truth that this war is not a mere slaughter of their fellow beings, but that they are combating an evil, and that, at the same time, corporal annihilation really means a rebirth of [the soul], not in heaven, indeed, but here among ourselves. I did my best to impress these ideas upon the soldiers' hearts.¹

Mohr's failure to introduce extreme quotations like the above is similar to what Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm does in connection with his translation of Inoue Enryō's 1887 article in chap. 3 of part 3, "Science and Philosophy," entitled "Prolegomena to an Argument for the Revival of Buddhism." Inoue wrote (p. 169):

Thus far I have argued that it is the aim of scholars to defend the nation and to love truth. Moreover, I have argued that Buddhism contains truths and I have shown that today a viable strategy for encouraging [specifically Japanese] patriotism would be by protecting Buddhism and broadening its scope.

1. Shaku Sōen, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, trans. Datasets Teitaro Suzuki (Chicago: Open Court, 1906), 203.

Although this passage, with its references to “defend the nation” and “patriotism,” suggests a nationalistic orientation on Inoue’s part, it nevertheless fails to prepare readers for the following passage Inoue wrote at the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904:

It goes without saying that this [Russo-Japanese War] is a war to protect the state and sustain our fellow countrymen. Beyond that, however, it is the conduct of a bodhisattva seeking to save untold millions of living souls throughout China and Korea from the jaws of death. Therefore Russia is not only the enemy of our country, it is also the enemy of the Buddha....

The peoples of China and Korea are also Orientals, the same Mongolian race as ourselves. Thus, these golden-[hued] peoples are our brothers and sisters, for we are one family. Our religions, too, have been one from the beginning. Therefore, putting Russians to death in order to save our family members is not only our duty as citizens, but as fellow Buddhists.²

Once again, we have another jingoistic, if not racist, utterance by a Japanese Buddhist leader who, like Sōen, sought to turn Buddhism into a servant of the ever-expanding Japanese empire. Note, too, that despite their militarization of Buddhism, both Inoue and Sōen remain highly respected by Japanese Buddhist leaders to this day. That said, the preceding two examples are, by themselves, insufficient to indicate an attempt to divert attention from the more bellicose, war-affirming pronouncements of the Buddhist leaders introduced. Yet, these examples are sufficient to at least raise the question of whether there are additional instances that may prove, or disprove, the existence of such an attempt.

In fact, it is not difficult to find another example of what may be called the “soft-peddling” of the words of other nineteenth century Buddhist leaders, this time in the person of Ōuchi Seiran. In part 4, “Social Reform,” Orion Klautau translates an article written in 1876 by Ōuchi entitled “On Civilization.” In the introduction to his translation, Klautau notes that Ōuchi was “a fierce anti-Christian.” Klautau was certainly correct in pointing this out as illustrated by the following passage (p. 187):

They [Westerners] attempt to somewhat control the dissoluteness of human nature by preaching the theory of a creator God (*tenjin zōka*)

2. Inoue Enryō, *Enryō Kōwa-shū* (Tokyo: Kōmeisha, 1904), 299–302.

no setsu 天神造化の説), but that is, in the end, no more than the view of one sweeping in the dark. This being so, Westerners are complete in terms of external form and lack internal virtue, while Easterners, mastering only the true meaning of internal virtue, still have not achieved the perfection of external form.

Yet, this passage does not prepare us to understand the depth of Ōuchi's religious intolerance coupled to, as it was, nationalistic fervor as demonstrated by the following passage:

Christianity and our imperial house can never coexist, for it is impossible to truly revere the imperial house while believing in Christianity.... Christianity not only turns its back on the righteous Buddhist teaching of cause and effect, but it is a heretical teaching that tears apart the establishment of our imperial house and destroys the foundation of our country. Therefore we must all join together to prevent this heretical teaching from spreading throughout our land.³

Once again, the reader is left to determine whether the inclusion of the first passage in the book, while ignoring material like that contained in the second passage, was a mere oversight or, on the other hand, is further proof of an attempt to protect the reputation of the article's author, Ōuchi Seiran.

That said, the editors deserve credit for including material describing what nineteenth century Buddhist leaders believed to be the proper relationship of Buddhism to the state. All five chapters of part 2, "The Nation," are devoted to this topic. Significantly, the five chapters were written at a time prior to the overseas expansion of the Japanese empire, beginning in the aftermath of its victory in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Thus, the initial lack of later jingoistic nationalist fervor may reflect the fact that they were writing at a time when such fervor was not yet necessary.

In addition, it is important to remember that the late nineteenth century was a time when the whole of Japanese Buddhism was under serious threat from both government and nongovernment supporters of a resurgent Shinto faith, now free of Buddhist thought and control. Hence, it is not surprising to read that the focus of the writings of Buddhist leaders of that era was to emphasize Buddhism's usefulness to the state, including its historical role of protecting the state as well as promoting loyalty to its ruler, now in the person of the emperor.

3. Akiyama Goan, ed., *Sonnō Aikoku-ron* (Tokyo: Benkyōdō Shoten, 1912), 49–52.

Closely related to this was a strong anti-Christian discourse that attempted to demonstrate the importance of Buddhism's role in rejecting this heretical teaching associated, as it was, with Western nations viewed as threats to the Japanese state.

Seen from this standpoint, there is nothing in part 2 that suggests the five chapters are anything more than a presentation of the multi-sectarian attempt to stress the importance of Buddhism to a rapidly modernizing Japanese state that was itself under pressure from Western encroachments. On the other hand, it can also be argued that there was no need for the editors and translators to exclude the later bellicose statements of Buddhist leaders inasmuch as Japan was not yet engaged in imperial conquest.

Be that as it may, the five chapters of part 2 are very helpful in understanding the thinking, or better said, the basis for what later became the total subservience of all of Japan's major traditional sects to the state and its policies of imperial expansion. This is exemplified by the following quote from chap. 1 of part 2 entitled, "On Protecting the Nation through Buddhism." Although the translated article was written in 1856, i.e., even prior to the Meiji Restoration of 1868, it is broadly representative of all the strongly nation-centric chapters that follow (p. 94):

The [act of] fending off foreign invaders—thus protecting the nation—is both public duty and holy war.... [I]t is easy to imagine billions together in one mind, united in truth against the enemy, advancing in great numbers out of loyalty to the ruler (*kinnō no gi* 勤王ノ義). That is why we should ward off the barbarians and protect the Land of the Emperor (*kōkoku* 皇国). It is by doing so that Buddhism will subsist alongside the nation.

An additional strength of this book is that it offers numerous translations that unlock primary sources for the wider scholarly community. At the same time, these primary sources are prefaced with introductions from leading English-language scholars of Japanese religion in the twenty-first century. Further, the book's editors show how Japanese Buddhism was part of a broader, globally shared reaction of religions to the specific challenges of modernity and go into great detail in laying out the specifics of the Japanese case. This is also reflected by the titles of the remaining sections of the book, i.e., part 1, "Sectarian Reform," and part 5, "Japan and Asia."

As previously noted, I only regret that a book like *Buddhism and Modernity* was unavailable when I first began my study of modern Japanese Buddhism. Even if the articles selected for inclusion sometimes ignore their authors' more extreme convictions, the book nevertheless opens the door for all English-speaking students of Japanese religions to understand how nineteenth century Japanese Buddhist leaders responded to the challenges of modernity in its many forms, from science, philosophy, and Christianity to modern nationalism. One cannot help but be impressed by the way Buddhist leaders reinvented Buddhism as a religion fully prepared to confront, if not overcome, the challenges modernity presented.

In offering a snapshot of influential Buddhist voices during the nineteenth century, *Buddhism and Modernity* makes a valuable contribution to the field of Buddhist studies in Japan that, heretofore, has typically focused on the premodern period. For this reason, it deserves a wide readership by those interested in the history of modern Japanese Buddhism.

